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An appreciative critique of police surveillance

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Published in:
Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology

DOI:
[10.3167/fcl.2019.850105](https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2019.850105)

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Sausdal, D. B. (2019). Policing at a distance and that human thing: An appreciative critique of police surveillance. *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 2019(85), 51-64.
<https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2019.850105>

Policing at a distance and that human thing

An appreciative critique of police surveillance¹

Abstract

Policing technologies are increasingly being developed to surveil and control people from afar. This is especially true in relation to cross-border crimes and other global threats where the necessity of monitoring such illegal flows is often advocated. In the literature, this is sometimes referred to as “policing at-a-distance”, signifying how the growth in different policing technologies is allowing police to oversee people without coming into physical contact with them. Overall, scholars find this development alarming. It is alarming because it reduces human lives to data points. It is also alarming as studies have shown how policing at-a-distance may trigger hateful police attitudes. With these problems of policing at-a-distance in mind, this paper explores how an increasing use of surveillance technologies affects Danish detectives.

Keywords: Policing (at-a-distance), cross-border crime, surveillance, (de)humanising, critique.

¹ This is an accepted and proofed author manuscript version of the paper. The paper is published as: Sausdal, David (2019) Policing at a distance and that human thing: An appreciative critique of police surveillance. *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*

Introduction

“The only way we’ll ever catch these goddamn foreign, cross-border criminals is by becoming as rootless as them. Because of how these fools travel the world much more than our normal Danish criminals, we need to collaborate with international colleagues, and we need to use technologies that allow us to track their movements. Look!” the detective tells me as he points to the screens in front of us, “from here we can see what’s happening at every train station. And soon we’ll get highway licence plate cameras. That’s the future of policing, us sitting in front of computers and punishing these bastards!”

- Detective Nielsen, Danish Police

Recently, ‘the anthropology of police’ has emerged as a subdiscipline in anthropology with scholars conducting ethnographic studies of the police all over the world (cf. Fassin, 2013; 2017; Feldman, 2019; Garriott, 2013; Jauregui, 2016; Hornberger, 2011; Karpiak and Garriott, 2018; Mutsaers, 2019). Although interests differ, often-examined matters are the questions of the police’s use of (il)legitimate force, police (im)morality and, more generally, why the police habitually have such negative attitudes towards certain people, especially foreigners and other minorities.

There are many answers to such questions. One particularly prevalent answer, though, concerns a lack of development of (an enlightened) “police culture” (Loftus, 2009). What scholars point to here is that police worldwide still appear to be harbouring conservative, chauvinist and xenophobic outlooks – outlooks that differ from, and are in conflict with, those of a moderate, multicultural and transnational world. Another answer in the policing literature can be found in Fassin’s recent observation that “the police have become a major controversial figure in the contemporary world, *while law and order policies have tended to disseminate globally*” (2017: 2, emphasis added). Here, the focus is not only on changes in the surrounding world but on the fact

that policing itself has significantly changed. As Fassin notes, present-day policing is now increasingly shaped and geared towards global rather than local threats. In the literature this is sometimes referred to as “the globalisation of policing” (Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012): the term globalisation denoting a growing collaboration between police forces and an increasing use and integration of information and surveillance technologies, which allows the police to surveil and apprehend suspects beyond district and national borders.

In a globalised world, where crime can be carried out online in the confines of one’s home or office, and where would-be criminals can more swiftly travel across national borders and potentially escape justice, it ostensibly makes sense to develop surveillance systems able to trace and tackle such itinerant issues. However, while understandable, the development of globalising policing also includes some thorny yet rarely debated vocational hazards – issues which Fassin’s words hint at. These issues are, for example, what Bigo and Guild have called the problems of “policing at-a-distance” (2005). Although, in functional terms, it seems like a good idea for the police to expand their Orwellian reach through various procedural and technological developments, Bigo and Guild argue that it simultaneously entails the risk of making policing a more cynical and even more violent profession (cf. Aas, 2012). As police officers’ real-life engagements with suspects are declining and replaced by proxies, the fear is that this will lead to officers literally having less understanding of the moral complexity of human living – a distance from, and reduction of, humanity that many anthropological studies (of the police and others) have shown to be one of the main ingredients of callousness, discrimination and violence (cf. Farmer et al., 2004).

With this mind, let us now return to this paper’s introductory and impassioned words uttered by a Danish police detective. These words were offered to me during the ethnographic study of the Danish Police I carried out in and around 2015. In it, I was allowed to follow the working day of two special detective units named Task Force Burglary (TFB) and Task Force Pickpocketing

(TFP), both operating in and around Copenhagen's greater metropolitan area. As their names suggest, the task forces were focused on transnational, organised crimes of burglary and pickpocketing – two types of crime regularly committed by what the police and policymakers term “foreign, cross-border criminals”. Put differently, the task forces' detectives' work consisted in them investigating international suspects from countries such as Romania, Poland, Morocco and Chile who were ‘visiting’ Denmark with criminal intentions. That, as both the detectives and their management would put it, “crime has now become a more global issue” was exactly why I found myself sitting next to Detective Nielsen as he was sifting through many hours of CCTV recordings in search of a group of Polish suspects. As Detective Nielsen told me, an increasing use of surveillance technologies was the only way they would be able to catch “these goddamn foreign, cross-border criminals”.

In this way, Detective Nielsen's words were a confirmative echo of how the future of policing is envisaged not only in Denmark but worldwide – a future of more and more sweeping means of surveillance by which people can be followed and policed from afar. Yet, this is not in itself the reason why I have included this introductory quote. Rather, the reason this paper begins as it does is that it efficiently illustrates how such policing at-a-distance did indeed trigger police negativity. As Detective Nielsen's words show, the Danish detectives often dressed their surveillance work in a language of contempt and castigation. In line with Fassin's contention, the detectives did often turn more opinionated whilst carrying out law and order work of a more global sort. While being policed via surveillance technologies such as CCTV, wiretaps and GPS-trackers, suspects became not only suspects but “fools” and “bastards” in need of punishment.²

² To the police, crime is often an ordinary and unexceptional part of their workaday lives. Therefore, when police officers think of suspects in especially contemptuous ways, it may be a sign that they think of them as not just criminals but utterly corrupt beings (cf. Van Maanen 1978).

In observing the Danish detectives' surveillance work, my study thus confirms that an increasing policing at-a-distance may lead to cruder police attitudes, either igniting already existing xenophobic inclinations or even forming the basis of new negative stereotypes. However, what I also experienced was that the increasing use of technological means of policing was not necessarily something the detectives appreciated. Herein lies the key contribution of this paper. Contrary to much research on the matter, which directly or indirectly implies that police officers tend to appreciate being at a calculating distance from the human lives they police (cf. Loftus et al., 2015), I found that this was something which Danish detectives often found troubling. Whilst, on the one hand, appreciating that technological developments were making their work easier, they did not appreciate the way that, on the other hand, as one detective explained it to me, "these technologies remove us from the human realities out there". "We", he continued, "need to not only see suspects on a screen but to also to get close to them out there on the streets to do good police work". In the remaining pages of this paper, I will explain what the detective meant by this and how this connects to critiques of present-day policing.

Issues of (policing at-a-)distance

Questions of distance vs. proximity or aloofness vs. more intimate involvement are not only central to much present-day police research (Fassin, 2013; Feldman, 2019; Jauregui, 2016; Mutsaers, 2019) but also to social science itself. Indeed, as one of the world's leading criminologists, Katja Aas, reminds us, "distance has a long history of being seen as socially conducive to the infliction of pain" (2012:253). In crude terms, we see this in recalling how founding figures such as Durkheim, Marx, Simmel and Weber were all invested in understanding how changes in physical but also sociocultural distance furthered by the genesis of the modern, industrial era (negatively) affected social and individual life. Weber, for example – and this is especially pertinent to this paper's

focus – took a sceptical view of the growing bureaucratisation of modern life, arguing that although a bureaucratisation of society had many benefits, it also included the risk of disenchantment (2004). Bureaucracies, he famously argued, encouraged a distanced form of rational thinking, uninterested in the wider circumstances and the human conditions.

Today, the issue of (bureaucratic/governmental) distance is still with us – and perhaps even more so (Rose, 2006). And nowadays, distance comes not only in the form of bureaucratic paperwork but through a growing technologising and digitalisation of almost all spheres of life. Both public and private actors are now increasingly able/required to engage digitally with one another without ever meeting in person. Sometimes computers even organise human interactions without the involvement of a single human being.

In his work, Bauman expressed a particular worry in relation to the potential negative human effects of such digitally mediated interactions (2013). He famously did this through the concept of “adiaphorization” – a term he used to describe what happens when “systems and processes become split off from any consideration of morality” (2013: 8). On other occasions he conceptualised his concern as a matter of “moral blindness” (ibid). In Bauman’s book, the (im)moral flipside of a society in which people increasingly meet each other as simulated representations rather than in real life is that it entails a risk of reducing the human richness of such encounters. Through technological innovations, we are now able to see and connect across vast distances. Yet, such connections, Bauman reasoned, are often cold rather than warm, rid of the wider and complex sensations and sensibilities of human living – and thus potentially morally blind.

To be sure, Bauman’s moral concerns appear a bit unrefined, romantic or perhaps even misplaced. Obviously, computers have not only allowed for mediated meetings across space and time which are purely cold and reductionist. Many people worldwide have meaningful and important interactions online which allow them to keep in touch with friends and family, create new

relationships or engage with organisations and institutions in easy and effective ways. That surveillance and information technologies cannot strictly be understood as an adiaphorising sociality at-a-distance is, for example, key to Madianou and Miller's work on *Migration and new media* (2013). What their work neatly points out is that the peculiarity of social media is that it – often positively – connects people with the inner sanctuaries of everyday life from afar whilst also including issues of exposure, misrepresentation and indifference. Similar points are made by Rottenburg *et al.* in their work on *The making of governmental knowledge through quantification* (2015).

What these anthropological observations remind us of is that the concepts of distance vs. proximity and aloofness vs. intimacy don't neatly map on to what surveillance and information technologies actually do. Evidently, even though Foucault couldn't have foreseen the dramatic growth in optical and digital means of surveillance, these concepts were still part and parcel of Foucault's argument about the panopticon and the disciplinary society (1977). To Foucault, the panopticon was *both* a technology of distance *and* of proximity, of control and of care, as it provided not only the governmental means to be all-seeing but also the individual incentives to self-govern.

That said, even though these lines of thought do not offer simple, binary explanations, they nevertheless all recognise that increasingly technologised relations between people have a remarkable effect on how they see themselves and others. Predominantly, this is a potentially negative effect, especially when looking at how governmental actors are now progressively 'seeing' the public in the form of (big) data rather than (complex) humanity – seeing people as mere “data doubles” rather than singular beings (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000).

Consequences of distanced means of policing

In the policing literature, the problems of an increasing distance between the police and policed was a central interest of Gary Marx's study of undercover police surveillance in the United States (1988). In his study, Marx was highly critical of what he saw as a "surveillance creep" (ibid); that is, a growing tendency for governance in general and policing in particular to turn to covert ways of overseeing the public. Be it a case of audio or video surveillance, stakeouts or infiltrators, Marx warned that this kind of policing was legally but also ethically problematic as it created an insurmountable distance between the police and policed. It, in other words, acted as a way of pigeonholing and muting suspects as the clandestineness of this policing, and its lack of actual interaction, meant both that the suspect's individual rights were violated and that they weren't given a fair opportunity to explain and represent themselves.

Since Marx's study, his concerns have been frequently and often more powerfully echoed. In short, this is because we no longer live in societies where surveillance and other distanced ways of policing are creeping up on us. Instead, we now live in what Lyon for example has described as a "surveillance society" (2007) – that is, we live in societies where the need for surveillance is not (only) expressed and carried out surreptitiously. Rather, as illustrated in this paper's introduction, politicians, the police and even large parts of the public openly speak of the need to surveil societal threats such as terrorism, undocumented migration and cross-border criminality.

This widespread turn to surveillance has given rise to many, often critical, studies (cf. Molland et al., 2018). Recently, for example, Loftus *et al* have pointed out how British "covert police officers ... ten[d] to objectify their targets [by] reducing the subject of surveillance to a set of indicators" (2015: 636). Bigo and Guild have a similar way of reasoning when they point to how European migration policing is increasingly managed by officials entirely removed from the world of the applicant. This produces a system where the applicant "no longer has any intrinsic value,

he/she is apprehended as part of a collective entity, as a disrupting flow, often dehumanised” (2005:253) (see also Feldman, 2011). In sum, what the policing at-a-distance literature tells us is that ways of surveilling and controlling people from afar, be it through procedural or technological proxies, entails the risk of problematically objectifying the policed party. It becomes an unsettling

spiralling effect in that control procedures are then designed to operate independently of the individual’s participation, to treat him as an object, to reduce him to nothing but a body and no longer a person capable of dialoguing with the various administrations[,] grant[ing] the state [t]he last word. (Guild and Bigo, 2017)

Furthermore, the problem of policing at-a-distance is not just that it potentially diminishes and disarms those at the receiving end. It simultaneously includes the risk of kindling police disregard. Policing people at-a-distance, Sheptycki maintains, includes

an enhanced belief in the efficacy of coercion [which] results in the tendency to lose contact with the complexity of reality and to grow ever more reliant on the exercise of force. The psychological price paid is manifest in defensive cynicism and aggressive moralism. (Sheptycki, 2007: 34)

A balancing act

That said, it would be wrong to simply conclude that policing at-a-distance is always a problem and that policing in more proximal ways is always a good thing. In terms of policing and surveillance, there are many examples that demonstrate that police proximity doesn’t bring about less police misconduct. Quite the contrary. In numerous countries, the police are notorious for over-policing certain communities, using a daily, interpellating proximity to remind certain people of

their place in the social order (Fassin, 2013; Hornberger, 2011; Jauregui, 2016; Mutsaers, 2019). Obviously, for the people living under such everyday police pressure, it would be preferable if the police were less close.

And, conversely, it is not hard to find examples of distance actually allowing for greater reflexivity. This was – as I will discuss later – exactly what Muir argued for in his celebrated quest to home in on what makes a good police officer (1979). In Muir’s analysis, an essential quality of a police officer is the officer’s ability to both physically and intellectually distance himself from the hardship that his job inevitably brings him into contact with and thus to see it as a depressing yet not outlandish part of human existence. Thus, when this paper points to policing at-a-distance as something of a problem, it is important that the reader understands that this is a Weberian ideal type conceptualisation, based on how the available literature on policing at-a-distance generally perceives and presents it, rather than it being a categorical proposition. An overly assertive and closely involved police officer is of course not the antidote to a detached policing at-a-distance. Rather, as Muir points out, good policing – or street-level bureaucracy in more general terms (Fassin et al., 2015; Lipsky, 2010) – is something of a balancing act between the right kinds of nearness and distance.

Danish policing at-a-distance

Let us move from the theoretical to the empirical. I will now provide examples of how it affected Danish detectives that their work included much policing at-a-distance – i.e. how this fostered cynicism and aversion. Admittedly, I haven’t included examples of how this also led to actual acts of police misconduct. I did observe what could be interpreted as too assertive ways of policing, yet these were always grey zone matters. In this way, as none of the incidents I observed were officially reported, and as it would be unethical of me to act as a judge based solely on my own observations,

I have decided to focus on the officers' perceptions rather than their practices. Still, it was obvious that the detectives approached suspects whom they had a closer knowledge of with a greater understanding, and even leniency, compared to suspects whom they had only encountered via surveillance technologies (Sausdal, 2018b).

Doing what the data tells you

At both TFB and TFP, policing at-a-distance was at the heart of their daily doings. The very first thing officers did when reporting for work was to turn on their computers. They did this to go through the previous day's report and to check up on different surveillance programmes. They looked at the report in search of individual cases or patterns worth investigating. They opened the surveillance programs to check on the wiretaps they had running, video and audio surveillance they had installed or the different location trackers they had set up. They sometimes went on to request CCTV footage from both private and public organisations or they simply looked through the many hours of footage they already had received. They checked their emails and other information technologies to see if they had received any useful intelligence from national or international colleagues. In this way, the detectives easily spent their working day at the office looking for and collecting evidence, intelligence or leads electronically. Yet, if these various technological means of policing didn't pay off, they would occasionally decide to go on stakeouts, covertly searching for suspects either on foot, sitting in their cars or in a flat from where they could follow the movements of selected suspects.

In this way, especially at TFB, days, weeks, even months could pass without the detectives coming into any physical contact with their suspects. Just as Fassin (2013) notes how his Parisian police interlocutors' working day resembled that of the TV series *The Wire*, so did that of the Danish detectives' – and perhaps even more so. Their working day was a long way from the action-

packed and close-encounter fictional portrayals of police work. Rather than obtaining their intelligence or evidence through a hands-on approach, the detectives typically got insights into their suspects' existence as they either spied on them during stakeouts or through video recordings. Alternatively, the detectives obtained aural insights as they listened in on some of the many hours of wiretap recordings stored on their computers. Yet, these observations frequently remained the closest the detectives got to the lives of their suspects before they, potentially, made an arrest. On other occasions, the detectives would make arrests relying solely on computer-based information from national or international colleagues and which the detectives themselves had no or little personal experience of. "We", a TFP detective tellingly told me as he was following the whereabouts of two Romanian suspects by checking the mobile phone masts their phones were connecting to, "often just do what the data tells us to do".

Filthy cross-border criminals

Though much of the detective work I observed was more of an isolated waiting game than of the confrontational sort, I did regularly encounter outbursts of emotion. As the following illustrates, this often happened when the detectives were observing suspects by means of surveillance technologies:

"They do it because they don't give a shit!", Detective Mikkelsen tells me, his voice raised and filled with antipathy. Detective Mikkelsen is dressed in civilian clothing, yet with handcuffs, a radio, a tactical vest and a weapon hidden underneath his attire. He and his TFP colleagues are about to go on a stakeout as they have received intelligence pinpointing the whereabouts of a group of Romanian cross-border criminals. "They have no respect for other people", Detective Mikkelsen con-

tinues, “they just see Denmark as a reservoir of richness waiting to be looted. Like, when we eventually catch them, it’s obvious how fucking indifferent they are. They have a completely different way of thinking about other people. To them, it’s natural to live a life of crime. This you have to understand. I mean”, he says to me, pointing to a printed CCTV-photo of the Romanian suspects which TFP has hanging on a whiteboard together with other surveillance footage and mugshots, “look at them. No care in the world. Absolutely none!”

...

When the detectives later return empty-handed from their stakeout, they first remove their radios, cuffs, vests and weapons. They go into the nearby staff kitchen for a cup of coffee and then reassemble in front of the whiteboard and the footage of the suspected Romanians. “Fucking filthy cross-border criminals”, Detective Clausen mutters, his face tired and damp from yet another encounter with the rainy Danish summer. Detective Clausen keeps looking at the footage on the whiteboard. “We’ll get them soon enough”, Detective Mikkelsen promises him, “just you wait and see. These damn Romanians won’t know what hit them. Bam!”

I have not chosen to include Detective Mikkelsen’s and Clausen’s words to single out their disdainful and punitive viewpoints. The same is true of other excerpts quoted earlier. I have included them as they represent sentiments widely shared by both the TFB and TFP detectives. During the time I spent following the TFP or TFB working day, I frequently found that the detectives reacted in this contemptuous way to suspects whilst monitoring them. The detectives would listen in on the phone calls of Romanian nationals suspected of committing several burglaries, they would look at footage of what they thought was organised groups of Moroccan thieves, they would go through computer records, and they would receive electronic intelligence from the Danish National Police or Europol, warning them of how known Lithuanian criminals were on their way to Denmark. They would listen to and look at this criminal intelligence, supplementing their observations with words

of contempt. The suspect ‘encountered’ through these media would be labelled “primitive”, “backward”, “asshole”, “idiots”, “degenerate” or “not human”, alongside other derogatory terms.

Before and after Romania

The usual negative and corrective outlooks were also presented to me when I, together with TFB Detectives Pallesen and Eriksen, was awaiting permission to board a plane leaving for Romania from Copenhagen Airport. Although most of the unit’s investigations were carried out in Denmark, they sometimes had to go on international missions to collect evidence or build up partnerships. In this case, as part of a Joint Investigative Team (JIT) between the Danish Police and Romanian authorities, Detectives Pallesen and Eriksen were going to the city of Botoşani in Romanian Moldavia. They were going there in the hope of securing evidence in support of a case they had been running (primarily via wiretaps and video surveillance) on a group of Romanian citizens who were thought to be part of a large organised criminal group operating in Denmark. However, the detectives weren’t particular optimistic. As Detective Pallesen despairingly told both Detective Eriksen and me as we were boarding the plane,

“I’m looking forward, but I honestly don’t expect to get much out of this. I mean, we know how Romanians are. They’re not gonna talk or cooperate in any way.” “Agreed!”, Detective Eriksen responds emphatically, “we’re surely gonna be met with nothing but unresponsiveness and lies from *these kind of people*”, Eriksen accentuating the last part of her sentence verbally and by rolling her eyes.

With these not-so-optimistic words, the detectives and I found our seats and waited for the plane to take off.

Fast-forward a week. The detectives and I found ourselves again in a similar situation. This time, however, we were waiting in the airport not to leave but to return to Denmark. We were going home after having spent many hours interviewing Romanian suspects, witnesses and victims. The detectives had also been on several trips in and around Botoşani, visiting the suburban neighbourhoods and villages where ‘these kind of people’ lived. Although the week had passed quickly, the detectives were moved by what they had experienced:

“Damn, these people are poor! Like, really poor. Did you notice how even the horse carriages have licence plates? I mean, wow! It’s like being transported back in time. And then seeing all these worn-down high-rises with no windows and holes everywhere as well as these village huts with no plumbing or nothing... seriously, seeing this has made me understand why they do it. It’s pure desperation, no?” Detective Eriksen says, reflecting on her experiences after five days spent in Romania. Detective Pallesen concurs. “Yes, it surely is. Seeing that, listening to our Romanian colleagues and sitting there talking to some of these Romanians with their toothless faces and hearing where they come from have definitely provided me with some perspective. I honestly wish we’d done this before. This was very useful.”

What can be learned from this example? First and foremost, it neatly demonstrates some of the key differences between policing at-a-distance vis-à-vis police work carried out in closer proximity with criminal suspects. As opposed to meeting criminal suspects in person or *in situ*, when the Danish detectives only “met” them through various surveillance media they would habitually think and speak of them in crude and derogatory ways. Objectified as either a visual, aural, biometrical or textual representation, the criminal suspect fell easily prey to the detectives’ negative notions as

the suspect was unable to speak back and thus potentially become more, in the eyes of the detectives, than a total delinquent. Yet, in this case, as the detectives had literally overcome (some of) the distance between Denmark and Romania, between themselves and some underprivileged Romanian citizens, they had also (somewhat) overcome their inclination towards negative stereotyping.

Certainly, the example of the detectives' visit to Romania is rudimentary. One may think that it only demonstrates a surprising lack of police empathy, remedied by an expensive trip abroad. Though there may be some truth to this, it was nevertheless my experience that the detectives' negativity towards suspects waned when they got the occasional chance to look at them beyond the secluded lens of surveillance technologies. When this happened, as shown above, suspected people of a certain uniform 'kind' had a better chance of becoming people in their own right – people who the police could not so easily roll their eyes at as they now appeared as people with a more meaningful backstory.

Developing cynicism

The examples of Danish policing at-a-distance have another important aspect. Besides demonstrating how officers become more considerate when actually engaging with criminal suspects in real life, they also show that this emotive turn affected the Danish detectives more widely. The police's real-life engagements also affected their own emotional state. From being sour and cynical when observing blurry CCTV footage, listening to wiretaps or reading intelligence reports of their suspected criminal counterparts, the detectives seemed happier and more content when allowed to encounter and experience criminal suspects as more than simple representations. Here, not only did the detectives' appreciation of the people they policed increase, so did their appreciation of their work.

In two recently published papers I have illustrated how the Danish police find professional satisfaction in having a more comprehensive understanding of their suspects' backgrounds and motivations (Sausdal, 2018a; Sausdal, 2018b) – a finding which reaches beyond the particularities of Danish police as it is echoed in other studies from different parts of the world (Björk, 2008; Feldman, 2016; Muir, 1979). Specifically, the paper is centred around the peculiar observation I made as I spent many (often uneventful) hours sitting with TFB detectives whilst they were listening in on phone conversations between various suspects. Here, I found that the detectives seemed both more interested and invested in their work when wiretapping Danish suspects than when running cases on foreign nationals (i.e. cross-border criminals). I found this peculiar as it contradicted the widely documented research finding that police often prefer to (over)police foreigners and other minorities than to police “their own”.

That the detectives weren't so enthusiastic about surveilling foreign nationals was made clear to me early one morning at TFB. A TFB supervisor came into the office where I was sitting together with Detectives Andersen and Pedersen. He was waving a post-it note. On the note, he told us, was intelligence on a group of suspected Romanian burglars on their way to Denmark. Yet his enthusiasm was not reciprocated. Instead, TFB Detectives Andersen and Pedersen reacted apprehensively at the opportunity of setting up a wiretap on the suspected Romanian burglars. To me, their hesitance seemed paradoxical as they were otherwise outspoken about the need for policing cross-border criminals. Still, Detectives Andersen and Pedersen, showed little interest. “Honestly”, Detective Andersen brashly answered her boss, “I don't care about those damn foreigners! I'd much rather carry on with the other case.” The other case concerned a group of young Danish minority men from the Copenhagen suburbs suspected of many burglaries across Zealand. Her partner, Detective Pedersen, nodded in agreement.

As I had imagined that Danish police were (more than) ready to investigate foreign nationals, observing their reluctance perplexed me. Being perplexed, I noted it and decided to probe further into the matter. Some weeks later I was given the chance to do so as things were slow and I was alone in the office with Detective Pedersen. He was going through some of the newest recordings from the case on the young Danish men. Sitting next to him, I observed how he was meticulously listening to the different length telephone calls and reading the texts the suspects had been sending. He was also checking their whereabouts by seeing what telephone masts their phones were connecting to.

Suddenly, Detective Pedersen smiled and looked at me. I asked him what he was smiling about (as I was more used to sneers than smiles).

“Nothing really ... I mean, I laugh because it’s funny to listen to these young guys. Like, this guy in conversation with one of his mates just told a story about how he was getting it on with this girl and how on top of the world he was – only to then phone that girl and have her completely reject him. She was toying with him and he was just taking it as all unconfident, horny youngsters do. You know, although we spend many hours listening to suspects talking about fuck all, the whole thing becomes quite nice when you get these insights into who they actually are. It makes it worthwhile, I think.”

Listening to him explain what he found of worth when listening to the wire, I decided to bring up his and Detective Andersen’s reluctance to investigate the suspected Romanian burglars. “Why didn’t that seem worthwhile?” I asked him.

“Of course, it’s worthwhile. It’s our job to catch all criminals and especially these foreign, cross-border criminals. No doubt. They need to know that we’re on to them ... That said, I guess the reason we reacted as we did was that it’s often a real tiresome task. We don’t understand what they say on the wire, so we need an interpreter. And the interpreter only translates that which is of direct relevance to the case. You see, the whole thing becomes very detached and boring.”

As we kept on talking about the difference between surveilling Danes and foreigners, he admitted that the difference was making him “more cynical ... Like, the interpreter only gives me the criminal matter, so I see the Romanian in these terms, as a crook”. Another TFB colleague contrasted this with how he often felt like:

“I really know the Danish suspects. Like, when I go out to arrest them, it almost feels like arresting a friend. Like, you’ve spent so many hours listening to that person talking to his family, his girlfriend, his mates, talking about normal stuff like what to buy from the supermarket, football and which party to go to. You get to know them like this. But if it’s a guy from another country, we don’t. We hear them speak a foreign language, but we don’t understand what’s going on.”

Fighting cynicism

Truly, this example of the different ways in which Danish detectives experience listening in on either Danes or foreign nationals – or Danish criminal suspects vs. cross-border criminal suspects – both accentuates and nuances the problem of how distance plays into professional perceptions. It is noticeable that both cases entail a use of surveillance technologies. In both cases the detectives didn’t encounter the suspects in real life and, as such, both cases ostensibly fall under the umbrella of policing-at-a-distance. Nevertheless, a vital difference is at play. As the example illustrates, when wiretapping Danish suspects, the detectives felt able to minimise the distance that the wiretap

otherwise created between them and the suspects. The persons surveilled, as they themselves revealed, became more than just criminals because the detectives were able to listen in not only on their criminal enterprises but also on the wider circumstances of their lives. This gave the detectives a context in which they could situate and understand not only the crime but also the criminal. When the detectives were wiretapping non-Danish speaking national foreigners, contextualising the crime/criminal in the same way was hindered by the banal fact that the detectives didn't understand the language spoken. They had to get an interpreter and the interpreter would normally only translate that deemed directly relevant to the criminal investigation.

Besides having an easier time bridging distance by means of a common language, the Danish detectives were also afforded other ways of understanding their Danish suspects better. Through access to various Danish national records, the detectives could read up on Danish suspects, getting to know more about their birthday, birthplace, job situation, residence, economy, taxes, criminal history, family situation, etc. When they were surveilling a foreign suspect such information was only rarely available and, if it was, had to be acquired from international partners. Lastly, the Danish detectives simply also felt that they knew the Danish suspects,

“because most of these criminals actually come from a context pretty similar to ours. Like, we’ve all been brought up in Denmark and been through all these Danish institutions. I mean, if we don’t know our Danish suspects then we know of them, right?”

Yet, when it came to, say, a Romanian suspect, the Danish detectives didn't feel that they had the same shared and embodied understanding of who they were policing at-a-distance. Technologies made them witness a lot but they didn't get the sense that they truly understood what they were looking at. To the detectives, surveillance here became a decontextualised, cooler and thus more

cynical affair – and so did the detectives’ attitudes towards the watched and, importantly, their own vocation.

Herein lies another important point. Yes, as research argues, policing at-a-distance involves a greater risk or making the police crude and cynical. No, as the examples show, this is not something the police necessarily welcome. Unlike the explicit or implicit notions in much research on the problems of policing at-a-distance, which tend to argue that police officers not only find it useful but also agreeable that those they are policing are objectified and stripped of any unnecessary human density (Loftus et al., 2015), the Danish detectives openly appreciated when criminal suspects appeared as more than just criminals. This more extensive knowledge of suspects gave the detectives not only, as they emphasised it, “an investigational advantage”, it was also “simply nice as it is nice to have a slightly greater understanding of the people we investigate. It keeps us from becoming completely callous assholes.”

That the police find solace in at least somewhat understanding the people they police beyond their misconducts is relatable to Björk’s description of how the police in Gothenburg “fight cynicism” (2008). As he reminds the reader, while it is true that the police vocation and its involvement with the troubling aspects of human life makes the police increasingly immune to human hardship, it is not the same as the police revelling in their indifference. On the contrary, Björk found that the officers who displayed a high amount of both professional capability and satisfaction were often the ones who actively engaged in not becoming too indifferent. And one of the main ways for the Gothenburg police officers to “fight cynicism”, Björk argues, was precisely for them to try to contextualise and understand their criminal suspects’ motivations beyond mere legal reasoning.

Good police

Indeed, as two foundational figures in police research, Van Maanen (1978) and Muir (1979), have similarly argued, it is exactly an officer's capacity to contextualise crime that makes him/her less contemptuous. Furthermore, as Muir goes on to conclude, contextualisation is not only what makes a person able to carry on being an individual who continuously has to face human indecency, tragedy and (use) violence – it is also a key ingredient in what makes “a good policeman” (1979). It is the anthropological bolstering needed for dexterous officers as it allows them to not just keep thoughtlessly to the letter of the law but also to situate their discretions in the complexities of human life. Contextualisation, Muir argues, keeps police from being either encumbered by apathy or consumed by aggression – from feeling that they are utterly different from or perhaps even pitted against people.

As Feldman has recently argued (based on his similar study of undercover police investigators policing transnational crimes in a Southern European country), reflective “thinking” rather than mechanical “cognition” was the fine phenomenological line that separated the ethical from the evil (Feldman, 2016). Though the Southern European investigators often took the law into their own hands (as all police around the world do), and thus entered “the gray zone” (Feldman 2019), what kept them from maliciousness, Feldman argues, was their ability to see similarities between themselves and their suspect – and to reflect on these openly with their colleagues as they negotiated what actions to take. If such room for reflection isn't available, Feldman concludes, the risk is that police officers will live up to Arendt's analysis of Eichmann. They become “thoughtless” and, thus, a banal yet consequential expression of a system of evilness (ibid). However, that possibilities for contextualisation and reflection exist – for bridging the gap and seeing the other as somewhat similar – of course doesn't guarantee that police misconduct won't happen. It is however an indispensable component in the fight against police discrimination and brutality.

Moreover, the problems of policing at-a-distance, and its inbuilt risk of cynicism, don't only concern the police. As Lipsky famously argued, all street-level bureaucrats rely not only on procedures but on actual interactions to best exercise their discretions (2010: 14ff). Police, teachers, social workers, health workers, all public service workers rely on means of contextualisation to make the scripted laws they are employed to enforce fit the compositions of everyday life (cf. Fassin et al., 2015). It is therefore disconcerting to observe how not only the police but many other agents of control are increasingly granted panoptic control mechanisms, allowing them to see and do more from afar, without there being a substantial focus on how to keep them thoroughly aware of, and interested in, the lives they oversee. In policing, at least, there is often a too narrow focus on the instrumental end-point – i.e. on “catching bad guys”. This is a focus also promoted by the police themselves as they rarely speak to outsiders nor to themselves about the how the means, ends and appreciations of their job go further and deeper than the question of whether a suspect is caught and convicted or not. Yet, as this paper has aimed to illustrate, policing actors have many more convictions. They don't necessarily find police surveillance meaningful just because it helps them catch criminals. They long for the intimacies and intricacies of close contact – not just to be able to correct and convict people, but also as a way of making suspects into more than just suspects and, notably, police work into more than just policing.

Conclusion: an open question

The paper has shown how Danish detectives' use of surveillance technologies included the risk of triggering animosity. In this way, the paper has confirmed many of the apprehensions expressed in the policing at-a-distance literature – a literature which foresees growing levels of police cynicism worldwide as policing actors increasingly carry out their work with little or no actual human interaction involved.

Yet, what this paper has also shown is that the effects of policing at-a-distance are not easily appreciated by Danish detectives. Contrary to the popular idea that the police enjoy the analytical distance offered by surveillance technologies, Danish detectives are often sceptical about it. Although they agree that the growing use and integration of police surveillance systems is necessary in the fight against progressively more mobile and complex forms of crime in a global world, they don't like the way this development disconnects them from the daily lives of their suspects. This is closely related to Gavin Smith's shrewd observation that more and new surveillance technologies may "empower the [surveillance] watcher" yet are "disempowering the [surveillance] worker" (2009). Put differently, the Danish detectives feel that the means of policing at-a-distance are indeed giving them effective Orwellian possibilities yet, simultaneously, taking away something they truly appreciate about their job; i.e. their discretionary ability to engage with and thus understand suspects beyond their criminality. Understanding criminals as human beings of a more complex sort, and not just as crooks on a computer screen, gives them not only a perceived investigational edge, it also provides them with a cynicism antidote as it enriches their profession beyond a strict police-policed polarisation.

This observation brings the paper to the words on which it will end. In the literature, there is a predisposition towards criticising the police and their aloof and intrusive means of surveillance and control. As the world is witnessing a dramatic and often dangerous growth in such means of policing at-a-distance, this is understandable. Yet, such critical stances also carry with them a problematic tendency as they not only point to how policing involves the risk of dehumanisation but, simultaneously, dehumanise policing actors as an incomprehensible and inexcusable group of people. As I see it, such antagonistic anthropological critiques are far removed from Karpiak and Garratt's appropriate call for an anthropology of police that aims not at shedding positive light on the police but at understanding "what makes the police – as both individuals and as an institution –

human[?]" (2018: 6). Similarly, a critique that doesn't distinguish between what a system produces and the system's producers doesn't fall under the heading of the anthropology of critique proposed by Fassin (2017). As anthropologists (of policing), Fassin notes, we are obligated to treat our interlocutors as intelligent and intelligible humans with, to them, meaningful and multifaceted appreciations. We might disagree with their reasoning and the results thereof, but we must nevertheless be able to ethnographically demonstrate how such reasoning makes sense to the people we study before we condemn it.

Furthermore, such a humanising ethic is not just the *sine qua non* of anthropological methodology, it also carries with it a critical potential in that, as studies have established, the police are more likely to listen and change if the critical scholar can demonstrate an actual appreciation of the world the police inhabit (Wuestewald and Steinheider, 2009). Bearing this in mind, and returning to the Danish Police, I didn't find it particularly difficult to appreciate the Danish detectives' viewpoints. This is because the detectives' views on policing at-a-distance were strikingly similar to the criticisms raised by anthropologists. They too found policing at-a-distance problematic as it made them more cynical and removed them from the convolutions of everyday life. They too missed non-Orwellian ways of policing which brought them into closer contact with their suspects' existence beyond virtual representations and criminalised actions. The detectives, like anthropologists, increasingly longed for "that human thing" (Karpiak and Garriott 2018). Though surveillance technologies promised to lead them more easily towards closed cases, they still found it more meaningful – just like anthropologists – to actively engage with "the human" as an open, central question" (ibid:6). Or, as one of the detectives put it on one of the last days of my fieldwork: "I didn't join the police just to be a computer extension. I wanted to get involved in the messy human life out there [him pointing out the window], to know it and sort it out."

Surely, in this sentiment lies both the potential of the iron fist and the velvet glove – of wanting to ‘apprehend’ humans in the word’s dual meaning both as in catching and comprehending (Vigh, 2018). In essence, this paper has tried to highlight and endorse the latter, and its relation to police surveillance, without forgetting the former.

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